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ABSTRACT

To introduce college students to the liberal arts, Castleton State College established the Soundings Program in fall 1985. The program was designed as a general education requirement for freshmen that earned one credit in each of the two semesters of the first year for attendance at (1) a limited number of required lectures and (2) eight elective events chosen from a variety of lectures, concerts, plays, dance performances, and art shows. The program was developed by college faculty and is under the aegis of the faculty's cultural affairs committee. Since the program's inauguration, significant changes include inclusion of debates on controversial issues, addition of optional trips to New York City, improved advance publicity about upcoming events development of a two-credit colloquium on Soundings events, incorporation of several special events into the freshman orientation program, and creation of a quarter-time faculty position as program coordinator. While initially controversial among some faculty, the program has gained wide acceptance and support. Student evaluations have grown more positive as former participants have advanced through their four years at the college. (Author/MSE)

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SOUNDINGS: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIBERAL ARTS

CASTLETON STATE COLLEGE

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AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project

The AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory is a two-year project seeking to establish and test a model system for collecting and disseminating information on model programs at AASCU-member institutions--375 of the public four-year colleges and universities in the United States.

The four objectives of the project are:

- To increase the information on model programs available to all institutions through the ERIC system
- To encourage the use of the ERIC system by AASCU institutions
- To improve AASCU's ability to know about, and share information on, activities at member institutions, and
- To test a model for collaboration with ERIC that other national organizations might adopt.

The AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project is funded with a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, in collaboration with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education at The George Washington University.

ABSTRACT

In an effort to introduce students to the range and power of the liberal arts, Castleton State College began the Soundings Program in the Fall of 1985. As designed, Soundings became a general education requirement that earned freshmen 1 credit in each of the two semesters of their first year at the College for attendance at a) a limited number of lectures which the entire freshmen class was required to attend and b) eight elective events which could be chosen from a lengthy list of other lectures, concerts, plays, dance performances, art shows, etc.

The program was developed by Castleton's faculty, approved by the Faculty Assembly and, to this day, remains under the control of the Cultural Affairs Committee of the College's faculty governance system. Since the inauguration of the program, several significant changes have been made. These include: 1) the inclusion of debates (e.g., on gun control), 2) the addition of optional bus trips to New York City for plays, concerts and visits to museums, 3) the improvement of advanced publicity about upcoming events, 4) the development of the so-called Soundings Colloquium, a two credit course that meets twice weekly for the purposes of researching, discussing and writing about Soundings events, 5) the incorporation of several special events into the freshmen orientation program, and 6) the creation of a quarter release time faculty position as Soundings Coordinator.

While initially controversial among a subset of Castleton's faculty, in recent years the Soundings program has gained wide acceptance and support and now stands as one of the distinctive curricular features of the College.

Evaluations, both written and in the form of semesterly group meetings with the freshmen class, indicate that students' appreciation for Soundings "improves with age." A recent series of group interviews conducted with randomly selected graduating seniors corroborates this point, with many seniors expressing that their retrospective view of the Soundings program was quite positive.

INTRODUCTION

The present document details the educational context existing at Castleton State College, and elsewhere, which ultimately gave rise to the conviction that a special program was needed to introduce students to the liberal arts. After setting forth briefly the background of this general education curriculum development effort, Castleton's Soundings program, now entering its fifth year, will be described. Changes that have taken place in the design of the program since its inception, along with the circumstances that led to those changes will be presented. Governance and staffing issues, as well as the program's budget will be discussed.

In a separate section the evidence for the effectiveness of the Soundings program will be presented, and conclusions and recommendations that might be of interest to those considering mounting a similar program will be described.

BACKGROUND

In 1981 a small group of Castleton faculty and administrators began to discuss what one faculty member had labelled the "matriculated tunnel vision" of college students of the 1980's. In discussing MTV, as it was called, Castleton's concerned faculty were echoing sentiments heard around the country in this period as faculty discovered the large numbers of narrowly focussed students whose interests all too infrequently range beyond getting a good job and making a lot of money. In this context, Castleton's faculty like their counterparts across the land, often found it very challenging to try to introduce such students to the liberal arts disciplines represented in the College's general education curriculum. What was needed, this small group felt, was an early exposure to the liberal arts which virtually "knocked the socks off" these freshmen students and taught them how exciting and powerful some of the ideas and manifestations of the liberal arts can be.

Although these early discussions spawned the seminal idea for what later became Castleton's Soundings program, it took several years for the specifics of the program design to emerge and for, especially, the political consensus in support of its initiation to crystalize.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The key goal that emerged for a new approach to general education at Castleton was the development of a program that would "introduce students to the range and power of the liberal arts." Implicit in the discussions of those who were involved in the design of this program, however, was an equally strong desire to break through and/or break into the "Matriculated Tunnel Vision" of the typical freshmen student of the 80's. For at least a few, the development of this program reflected the desire some faculty felt to return to an earlier style of campus life when the academic community would often gather to hear and consider uplifting and/or provocative ideas. As one Castleton faculty put it: "Perhaps what we need is a sort of intellectual chapel requirement."

In the end, after months--really years--of discussion and refinement of initial ideas, the consensus emerged to propose the establishment of the Soundings program. In the early Faculty Assembly debate, many faculty expressed concern about issues of accountability. Some were unwilling to support the award of academic credit for an experience that did not take the form of the traditional course where students and faculty gathered regularly in a classroom to focus on intellectual matters. Others worried whether it would be possible to verify who was present at any specific event and who had attended the entire program. Quite a few faculty thought that readings should be assigned and that writing tasks should be used as a basis for evaluating whether students had reflected on their experiences and gained something from them. While none of these concerns were unjustified, logistical considerations made it impossible to address more than the questions about the verification of attendance. The individuals proposing the program certainly would have liked to have incorporated readings, writing assigments and other measures designed to enrich and deepen the learning possible from each event, but such simply was not possible given the faculty resources that this would have required.

The final version of the motion authorizing this program did not, in fact, call for the granting of academic credit. It was only through a reversal of this decision by the then president of the College that the program eventually instituted carried credit. (As might be expected, this specific decision by the president was initially controversial; although in retrospect it seems quite possible that the program might have been doomed to failure had the president not made the decision that he did.)

In its first year, the program enjoyed both some wonderful successes and some notorious failures. Lectures by paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey and Nobel lauriate Betty Williams proved to be stirring high points of the academic year which not only engendered much discussion, debate and enthusiasm among students and faculty, but also brought recognition to the campus from outside constituencies impressed by the caliber of these people. On a different note, however, at least one of the first Soundings lectures proved to be a disappointing--almost embarrassing--failure. In all, the program was sufficiently successful for those involved in organizing it to feel confirmed in their commitments, and much was learned about changes that needed to be made for the future.

Since its beginning, control over the Soundings program has resided with the Cultural Affairs Commitee, a standing committee of Castleton's Faculty Assembly. In fact, since shortly before the evolution of Soundings the role and sphere of influence of the Cultural Affairs Committee had become greatly diminished, Soundings became the primary and, eventually, the exclusive focus of that committee. The main function of the committee each year was to determine how a budget composed both of student course fees and a contribution from the College operating budget should be spent on events large and small. The original committee was made up of a relatively small but extremely dedicated group of faculty with two administrators assisting. In addition to picking the program for the year, the Commitee focussed much of its attention on logistical details that might increase the effectiveness of the program. The faculty discussed whether the lectures should be given by nationally and world renowned figures or by excellent, but largely unknown speakers. They talked about the relative merits of restricting access and holding the events in smaller physical spaces vs. planning their

schedule around use of spaces large enough to accommodate all comers. Much attention was given to questions about how such a program could accommodate students--especially older students with families--who had unresolveable conflicts with some of the requried events. After the first two years, the Committee agreed, with the support of the administration, to propose that a faculty member be given quarter release time to oversee some of the details of the program. Previously, all faculty involved volunteered their time without compensation, and the only individual paid to assist was the Coordinator of the Fine Arts Center, who is not a faculty member.

After considerable debate, the Faculty Assembly endorsed a recommendation to the administration for the creation of a quarter release time Coordinator position, and this was adopted for the following year. Subsequently, the Committee proposed a course of a more traditional nature focussing on Soundings which would involve students meeting with a faculty member on a regular basis. For some, the colloquium represented an experiment which they hoped might ultimately spawn a new and improved--at least expanded--version of Soundings. (While the colloquium has continued to this day, it has not led to any major modifications in the Soundings program and may, in fact, be languishing.)

In the most recent academic year, the Faculty Assembly approved a further proposal from the Cultural Affairs Committee, this for the creation of a half-time administrative position as Coordinator of Soundings as well as the conversion of the quarter release time of the faculty slot to a different application. For the 89-90 academic year for the first time, a faculty member will have release time to serve as the "Virgil figure" for Soundings, a position which entails being in effect the Master of Ceremonies and the human basis for continuity for freshmen participating in the Soundings program. Many would still like to see improvements in the methods whereby accountability is assured, and some continue to discuss the extension of Soundings into a year-long three credit course with substantial reading and writing assignments which might address the College's general education requirements for oral and written communication.

The costs of the program are as follows:

Quarter release time for faculty member (including benefits) approximately	$10,000.00
Half-time 9 1/2 month Coordinator (excluding benefits	6,000.00
Programming expenses (lecture fees, travel, accommodations, meals and costs of receptions)	45,000.00
TOTAL	$61,000.00

These expenses do not include "hidden" costs that take the form of duplicating expenses, secretarial time, the time of the two administrators who sit on the Cultural Affairs Committee and attend to various logistical details, etc. In partial defrayment of the expenses of the program, all new students registering for Soundings are assessed a $25.00 fee for each semester of the course they sign up to take. This generates approximately $30,000; which means that the contribution to the expense of the program which must come from the College's operating budget is modest.

RESULTS

Although evaluation of the Soundings program occurs each semester, the College has not done extensive data collection. Each semester students complete a questionnaire evaluating the program and participate in a group meeting with a subset of the Cultural Affairs Commitee. These exchanges tend to result in extremely frank feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of the program as well as about some of the logistical details in need of adjustment. While many students indicate they like the program, others are resentful that they are being required to attend programs alien to their tastes. There is mounting evidence, however, that the appreciation for Soundings improves with age and maturity. A recent series of group interviews conducted with a random selection of graduating seniors produced numerous positive comments about Soundings and no single negative mention. Several students, in fact, articulated how their opinions of the program had changed dramatically since their freshmen years. Perhaps most heartening was the recent decision by the senior class to invite one of the individuals who lectured at a Soundings event during their freshmen year to be the Commencement speaker (Betty Williams). As is so often the case, "more research is needed," but many associated with the program are convinced that the most useful information will come only through assessments provided by alumni five or more years out of Castleton.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Without question, Castleton is pleased to have its Soundings program and remains committed to the continuation of the program for the indefinite future. While concerns about accountability and about getting the most out of the potentially very valuable Soundings events continue, there are a few if any vocal opponents of the program. On the contrary, support for the program has grown noticeably over the years as evidenced, perhaps, by the fact the Cultural Affairs Committee has become the most popular committee assignment among faculty at Castleton. Recent evidence that seniors have an almost universally positive view of the program has reinforced the enthusiasm and commitment of the faculty originally responsible for the development of the program. There seems to be general consensus that Soundings has survived its infancy and is now at least in its adolescence, if not young adulthood. The success of the program is further evidenced by the continued willingness on the part of the administration to enhance the program budget. While some at Castleton can envision ways of doing Soundings "bigger and better," there is no reason to think that some version of the program could not be replicated at many other higher education institutions.